

John Lettiere 1945-2010

I met John Lettiere on the Bob Dylan usenet group, RMD (rec.music.dylan). Most of John's posts were rough and tough, fuck this, fuck that, fuck you, that sucks. I noticed in his signature, a company, Preferred Computing. So one day when my computer was acting weird, I emailed him. That started a relationship that lasted more than a decade, and only got deeper and closer as time went on.

I learned that behind that rough, always cursing façade, and John, an Italian from the Bronx could say fuck with relish, was one of the most thoughtful, caring people I've ever met with the biggest heart in the world.

Not only did John help me with my computer problems that day - "Buy a new one, it's a fucking outdated piece of shit" - but continued to help me to the last day he could.

Emailing John meant you immediately were added to his email list. John's email list was relentless. Bad jokes, (sometimes good ones), stupid pictures, (and sometimes beautiful ones), tons of petitions for all kinds of causes, political, saving wild life, healthcare, stopping the war, the bailout, everything. And along with those articles and petitions were John's short rants about the rethuglicans. Also in those emails were computer tips. Every time there was an update for a program, John would let you know. Every time there was a new virus, new malware threat, new spyware threat, any kind of security threat, John would let you know. If he knew you had a certain program, and there was a new version, he would email just you about that program.

John loved Bob Dylan, but wasn't afraid to knock him either, when he didn't like something. If I wanted a show, or even mentioned a show, the CD would show up in the mail a couple of days later. One time he told me about going to the Village from the Bronx to buy his first Dylan album, and

what it meant to him, and in his voice, I could still hear the excitement and passion of that day more than 40 years ago. John loved with equal passion Patti Smith, The Band, blues, and especially old jazz and swing.

In person, John was a huge towering bear of a man, loud, at times outrageous and boisterous and a hell of a lot of fun. I remember one time, a bunch of us met for drinks in NYC to talk about Bob with if memory serves, Stephen Scobie, a writer and professor from Western Canada. We met in the backroom of a boxing bar just off Times Square, and the discussion went far beyond Dylan into baseball, philosophy, politics, you name it. A couple of days later we learned that while we were in that boxing bar, where the walls were lined with photos of every great and maybe not so great boxer, a few blocks away in Madison Square Garden, Bob Dylan and Tony Garnier were watching a boxing match. Take what you have gathered from coincidence.

Once we became friends, John became a huge supporter of my music, attending every show I did in NYC, and whenever I'd announce a new gig, he'd post it to RMD. When a couple of people called him on it, complaining that this was a Dylan newsgroup, they got the inevitable Lettiere response, "You don't like it, don't read it, and go fuck yourself."

One time I played a coffeehouse in NYC, with my soul brother from Manchester, England, CP Lee. The place was packed. The money was insubstantial. Someone told John I wasn't happy, and he came to me and said, "You want me to go in there? I'll fucking go in there." I looked at John, a gigantic man who looked like he could have easily been part of Tony Soprano's crew, quickly pondered all my best Godfather revenge fantasies, and then looked at this big group of people who were waiting to go eat and drink. There was no doubt in my mind John would get me more money. There was no doubt in my mind I would never play that club again (which I didn't anyway, it closed, not long after), and there was also no doubt in my mind, I'd probably spend the rest of the night bailing John out. So I said, let's just go drink.

When John liked something, he his enthusiasm was unbounded. When I started including my friend, guitarist

Larry Broido on my New York gigs, John went nuts. “Where the fuck did you get that guy? “He’s fucking amazing, he’s fucking better than anybody fucking playing with fucking Dylan. Don’t you fucking lose him.”

One day, John, decided to check out my friend Trev Gibb's my space page. John knew Trev from RMD and also knew he was my good friend. John had helped him out with various computer hassles over the years mainly because he was my friend. When you were a friend of a friend, John would go all out. Trev is 30 years younger than me and 40 years younger than John. John discovered a song he liked and just went crazy. He emailed me, "What is that song 'Corrina's Nylon Strings,' that is fucking great. How the fuck did that kid write that." Trev has a habit of recording his songs a ton of times until he gets the right version. I sent John every version. The night of the day John died, Trev had a show, in his hometown of Newcastle, England. Late that night he wrote me: Tonight I did "Corrina's Nylon Strings" for John. I told the audience about him, and you could have heard a pin drop. Everyone was feeling it. and it was the best god damn version I ever did.

The thing is, John came on tough, but behind that bluster, behind the cursing was a guy who cared deeply. Every time he'd call, he'd ask not only about me, but about any friends I had whom he know of. He was never too busy to help or to call back. Even if I called just to say hello, and didn't leave a message, if he saw my name on the caller I.D., he'd call back, always starting with, "What's up, Pete?" If he knew you were trying to get in touch with him, and he was going to be out, he'd always leave a message saying exactly when he was out would be back. More than once we'd stay up all night, dealing with a computer crash, trying various options until we got it going. Suddenly it would be four in the morning, and I'd say, "You want to go to sleep, John." The response was always, "No, no, there's something else we can try." And so we'd spend the time while whatever we were trying was doing its thing, talking about everything, and I came to realize as a mutual friend emailed me yesterday, "John knew something about everything."

Last Thanksgiving, I visited him. He lived basically just down the road from my brother. I needed something done

on my computer, but that was (and he probably knew it) just an excuse to see him. I'd been there once before, just staying overnight, arriving late, leaving early the next morning. This time I had time to look around and I couldn't help but notice there were books everywhere, in every conceivable space. Tons and tons of books. John, like me, had dropped out of high school and was self-taught.

In 2001, when the great R&B singer Howard Tate (who'd been for all intents and purposes missing for 30 years) , was rediscovered, and playing NYC, I emailed all my friends in NY about him. John and his wife Cindy were the ones who went. I went to the bathroom, and when I returned, John said, Cindy saw his manager in the lobby. Go! I went and a few days later found myself in Howard Tate's living room, interviewing him resulting in my first cover story for a magazine.

When Patti Smith did a show of William Blake songs and poems at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, John invited me to go. He arrived by bus. When we got into my car afterwards to get some food, and to take him to where he needed to go to get home, I turned to air conditioning on. It was summer in Manhattan, 90 degrees. Typically enough, he started ranting, "You're wasting gas, you're wasting gas." I said, John, it's New York City in the fucking summer. I bought this car new, and I've never noticed any difference in mileage with the air on at all.

When Bob Dylan contributed liner notes to Dion's box set, I typed them out and sent them to John. Back came a typical Lettiere reply. I hate that fuck. He was in this gang (I forget the name) in the Bronx and used to beat me up. The next day, I heard Dion on "Fresh Air," and sure enough he mentioned the very gang John named.

Behind that tough talking, always cursing façade, was someone who genuinely cared, someone who wanted to help, no matter what. Someone you could talk to about anything, anytime day or night. Need a computer part, always instantly, this is the one to get. Need information about everything, the inevitable email with every conceivable link. If you needed to talk, because you were down and life wasn't going the way you wanted it to, John was always there. A few years ago, when I was in the hospital for what turned out to be an extend stay, John called every day.

And so, when John wrote me two weeks ago to first, say he liked my Willie Nelson article, and then to say the reason I hadn't heard from him is the doctors discovered something on his liver, my heart sank. And I knew then, though everything in me was trying hard to resist it. And it hit me just who I was going to lose, and what a true, loyal and great friend he was to me. In the more than a decade, I knew him, we never had a fight, a personal fight. We might argue about who really wrote The Band songs, or during the primary, Obama versus Clinton, but we never had a fight. For the past week, I've been staring at that email folder with thousands of emails, some still unread, about the latest political outrage or the latest program update trying to comprehend the fact that there's never going to be another new email in there again.

In a world where the word friend has come to mean someone you don't know and someone you will probably never meet on Facebook or Myspace, John was a real friend, and a one-of-a-kind character. I never use this word, and he'd probably cringe and yell at me if he saw it, but I was blessed to have known him and been his friend.